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Deposited in DRO:

11 June 2018

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Moberly, R.W.L. (2017) 'Theological interpretation, second naiveté, and the rediscovery of the Old Testament.', *Anglican theological review.*, 99 (4). pp. 651-670.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/read/article/2254/>

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Theological Interpretation, Second Naiveté, and the Rediscovery of the Old Testament

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This essay is in four parts. The first briefly sketches some of the problems for Christian understanding and use of the Old Testament posed by contemporary ecclesial and academic culture. The second part considers some of the extensive conceptual resources that have become available in recent years through a revolution in hermeneutics; these make it possible to rethink the nature and purpose of the study of the Old Testament in terms of “theological interpretation,” which is still informed by the insights of modern historical-critical scholarship yet is simultaneously more engaged with the concerns of contemporary faith. The third part considers some other models for theological interpretation, especially the work of Walter Brueggemann and the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar led by Craig Bartholomew. The final part briefly considers the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, as an example of a text that can be validly read in more than one way.

I imagine that I am not the only Christian to wonder sometimes whether Marcion may not be quietly smiling in his grave. Marcion has the dubious distinction of being the first person to be declared a heretic by the Christian church. A major reason for this was his denigration of the Old Testament, and his contention that the deity of the Old Testament was not the God of the New Testament. However, it is one thing for the church formally to disapprove of Marcion and to maintain that the Old Testament is an integral part of the Christian Bible: the God who creates the world and is the God of Abraham and of

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Israel is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is another to look at how Christian churches typically use the Old Testament in practice. My personal impression is that a large number of churches make little or no constructive use of the Old Testament, have little knowledge or comprehension of its content, and seem happy for the most part to manage without it.¹ The singing of psalms has largely fallen by the wayside, and Old Testament readings are occasional. Sermons based on the Old Testament are rare, and more often than not the preacher is unenthusiastic about its content, and uses it as a negative foil for making a positive point drawn from the New Testament.

The Old Testament in Modern Biblical Scholarship

Although the likely reasons for this eclipse of the Old Testament are many and varied, I will briefly sketch, in a broad-brush way, one likely contributory factor, at least in recent times. This is the persistence of a certain mismatch or incoherence between academic study and ecclesial use of the Old Testament.

The traditional Christian understanding of the Old Testament is that it in some way speaks of Christ. The classic paradigm is presented by the story of Jesus and his disciples on the road to Emmaus, where Jesus “beginning with Moses and all the prophets interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). The ways in which Christians read the Old Testament in relation to Jesus have been embodied in liturgies down the ages and receive wonderful artistic depiction in some medieval churches—for example, the sculptures around the doors at Chartres Cathedral, or the windows in King’s College Chapel, Cambridge. Yet the theological significance of traditional Christian reading has been diminished by the rise of a sharper historical awareness in modernity. Scholars have insistently asked what the scriptures of Israel meant to their original writers and readers before the coming of Jesus. They have found that they were richly meaningful in relation to the life of ancient Israel and Judah, and that although there were hopes for the future these did not take the form of awaiting “the messiah.” Traditional Christian theological understanding has come to seem somewhat quaint and fanciful—part

¹ See the illuminating recent analysis by Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017).

of a rich cultural heritage, no doubt, but no longer a live contemporary option.

The impact on the churches of this more sharply historical approach to Israel's scriptures in their ancient, pre-Christ, context—known in the nineteenth century as “the higher criticism”—was mixed. On the one hand, there was real gain. In the United Kingdom Christian scholars such as S. R. Driver and George Adam Smith combined scholarship and faith in ways that made sense to many, and made the new mode of scholarship acceptable in the mainstream churches. In particular, George Adam Smith's studies of the prophets, *The Book of Isaiah* and *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, received a wide readership in the churches and were felt to bring the biblical texts into a fresh and illuminating focus.

On the other hand, there was also loss. Historical insights suggested that the likely course of Israel's history and religious development was markedly different from its presentation in the Old Testament. The shorthand for this is that instead of the law coming before the prophets, as in the canonical presentation, the prophets came before the law, as famously argued by Julius Wellhausen. For many who were not scholars this had a bewildering effect for understanding the biblical text, especially the Pentateuch: was it just bad and unreliable history? And in any case, how did a knowledge of the best new scholarly hypotheses about the origins of Israel's sacred literature and the development of its religion help with the use of the Old Testament in Christian ministry and preaching? Famously, in 1882 Wellhausen resigned his chair of theology at Greifswald and explained his resignation thus:

I became a theologian because the scientific treatment of the Bible interested me; only gradually did I come to understand that a professor of theology also has the practical task of preparing the students for service in the Protestant Church, and that I am not adequate to this practical task, but that instead despite all caution on my own part I make my hearers unfit for their office. Since then my theological professorship has been weighing heavily on my conscience.²

² Cited in Rudolf Smend, “Julius Wellhausen and His *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*,” in Douglas A Knight, ed., *Semeia 25: Julius Wellhausen and His Prolegom-*

The resignation is undoubtedly a tribute to Wellhausen's integrity (even though his "despite all caution on my own part" downplays the frequently snide and provocative comments he made about parts of the Old Testament that he did not like). But although he recognized that there was a problem about the relationship between "scientific" biblical scholarship and the life of the church he had no idea what to do about it other than to opt unreservedly for "scientific" work. He thereby contributed to what became a long-term problem in the relationship between scholarship and faith.

When I trained for ordination in the mid-1970s at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, and took a university BA in theology as part of my training, I remember being puzzled, and frequently querulous, about how the scholarly work I was doing (pentateuchal criticism, Deuteronomistic History, and so on) related to how I was going to preach from the Old Testament and use it in my ministry. Even worse, I remember the plight of a friend who was not doing the university degree, but an internal theological colleges' course, which one might perhaps expect to be more closely attuned to the questions and priorities of ordained ministry. This friend had to do four essays on the Old Testament during his training. The first was "Did Abraham exist?"; the second was "When was Deuteronomy written?"; I forget the title of the third; and the fourth was "What was the date of Ezra's coming to Jerusalem?" I find it hard to think of another set of questions more likely to put someone off valuing and using the Old Testament in their ministry! They are all, of course, legitimate questions; but they are the ancient-history-oriented questions of professional scholars, not those of the average reader of the Old Testament, still less those of its would-be preachers. This mismatch between the kind of agenda that students have regularly faced in their theological training and the needs of Christian life and ministry is surely at least one significant contributory factor in the eclipse of the Old Testament.³ Also indicative of the problem is the widespread scholarly preference for the supposedly religiously neutral term, *Hebrew Bible*, instead of the specifically Christian term, *Old Testament*.

ena to the History of Israel (Chico, Calif.: Society of Biblical Literature: 1983), 1–20, at 6.

³ A provocative account of this issue is Dale Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

Against this background, I would like to sketch something of the nature and significance of recent moves to develop “theological interpretation” or the “reading of the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture.” Numerous different factors have converged to produce something of a sea change in recent Old Testament study. It is not that everybody is now practicing theological interpretation—far from it! Rather, there is today an ever-growing plurality of approaches and methods within Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholarship, and it is increasingly unclear what holds them together beyond the fact that they are in some way talking about Israel’s scriptures. Nonetheless, theological interpretation is now one among other established areas within the sphere of biblical scholarship, and it is an area of particular importance for Christian reading of the Old Testament.⁴

Six Factors Underlying Theological Interpretation

Perhaps the best keynote for theological interpretation is the famous words of Paul Ricoeur: “Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again.”⁵ Modern scholarly criticism, while legitimate, can become arid. How then can one reengage existentially with the Bible in its classic significance—a place of encounter with God—without abandoning scholarly integrity? This is not the place to try to do justice to the weighty oeuvre of Ricoeur, who along with Hans-Georg Gadamer has been a major figure in rethinking the interpretation of texts in ways that fundamentally shift the contours of modern biblical criticism.⁶ But we must recognize his importance in articulating the possibility of being “called again” in a way that does not deny, but both incorporates and moves beyond, typical modern scholarly concerns: thus the notion of a “second naiveté.”

⁴ The flagship journal, though not restricted to the Old Testament, is the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*.

⁵ *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1969), 349.

⁶ A good introduction to Ricoeur’s work and its significance for the Bible is his *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. with introduction by Lewis Mudge (London: SPCK, 1981). Ricoeur’s own understanding of Old Testament interpretation can be seen in André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1998). An excellent account of the wider implications of the work of Ricoeur and Gadamer for biblical study, especially the New Testament, is Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999).

In general terms, a “first naïveté” means taking things (in this context the Bible and faith) straightforwardly, at face value. Critical reflection, when undertaken, probes and discovers difficulties. Although this is a valid undertaking, it can have the effect of neutralizing the existential significance of what is scrutinized. Ricoeur’s achievement is to show how one can validly regain a living existential engagement with what one critically scrutinizes, not least the Old Testament. This second naïveté is sometimes called a “postcritical naïveté,” which is unfortunate and misleading because it is not about ceasing to be critical but about becoming critical in a different mode and by different criteria. Nonetheless, because interpreters with a second naïveté can take the recognition of certain problems for granted, and so no longer linger on them, they can at times sound similar to those who, still in a first naïveté, have not yet really recognized the problems in the first place. One may need to attend carefully to what is, and is not, said, and to how it is said, if one is to discern the difference between the two naïvetés.

A second factor underlying theological interpretation is the growth of literary approaches to the biblical text. Where once “literary criticism” meant “source criticism,” it now refers to genuinely literary modes of reading. For example, the concept of “the narrator” (a literary category) may replace questions about “the author” (a historical category), and a concern with “intertextuality” (significant resonances between texts that may be unintended by anyone) may displace concern with allusion or citation (matters of authorial intention). A landmark work was Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.⁷ It suddenly became possible to see how one could read narratives as meaningful literary wholes, even if in compositional terms they might be composite; the whole can be more than the sum of its parts, and can be meaningful precisely as a whole. Since this approach has now become well-established, it is easy to forget the initial impact it made on readers trained for several generations to read pentateuchal narratives (in particular) with questions uppermost in mind about the source or redaction to which any verse might best be ascribed. In its own way, this enabled a second naïveté mode of reading.

Another characteristic of literary approaches is the rediscovery of the importance of the imagination in interpretation. Although Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers had often viewed the

⁷ London: Allen and Unwin, 1981.

imagination negatively as essentially akin to whim or fantasy as opposed to the responsible use of reason,⁸ it now became possible to see the imagination as an integral element in good interpretation. Of course, the imagination must be instructed and used in a disciplined way. Nonetheless, to affirm the importance of the imagination is to recognize the open-ended nature of the interpretation of great and resonant literature, such as is abundantly found in the Old Testament. When the imagination is theologically informed it also becomes possible to reengage with great premodern readers, from the fathers onward, and freshly situate contemporary interpretation in an enduring Christian conversation about the meaning of scripture.

A third factor is the rediscovery of the importance of the role of the reader in interpretation. If historical-critical work is the priority, the role of the interpreter is construed as being akin to a judge in a law court. The task is to attend to all the evidence, to weigh and sift it with critical insight, and not allow one's own preferences to skew an honest evaluation of the evidence. Disciplined and informed reason, with appropriate use of the imagination, should be the prime characteristic of the good interpreter. This is indeed valuable. Yet it has come to be recognized that with all significant writing in the humanities that probes deep issues of human life, an ability to understand the nature of existential issues is important for good interpretation. Thus in addition to considering the text in its formative context of origin, it becomes important also to consider the interpreter's formative context. One of the ways theological interpretation differs from more conventional theology of the Old (or New) Testament is that accent is laid on the quality of insight that interpreters are able to bring to the biblical text in order the better to articulate the nature of the theological and existential subject matter about which the text speaks. This regularly involves a grasp of paradox and mystery; being at home with this is also a mark of a second naiveté.

A fourth factor underlying theological interpretation is the influence of a remarkable and concentrated flourishing of Christian scholarship a generation ago at Yale Divinity School. Sometimes reference is made to this as the "Yale School," though the key protagonists tended not to think of themselves in such a way. What marked

⁸ For the history of ideas see, for example, Garrett Green, *Theology, Hermeneutics, and Imagination: The Crisis of Interpretation at the End of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the Yale scholars in one way or another were attempts to escape the increasingly arid debates between “liberals” and “conservatives” that determined so much of biblical and theological scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and instead to rethink and re-shape how rigorous and faithful biblical and theological scholarship might otherwise be undertaken. Among the well-known figures are Brevard Childs in Old Testament, Paul Minear in New Testament, George Lindbeck in systematic theology, and Hans Frei in theology and hermeneutics. More recently some of the scholars at Duke Divinity School have continued what was begun at Yale, among the best known of whom are Stanley Hauerwas in theology and ethics, Richard Hays in New Testament, and Ellen Davis and Stephen Chapman in Old Testament.⁹

For our purposes the key figure is Brevard Childs, who articulated a “canonical approach” to the Old Testament.¹⁰ A historical-critical approach, as practiced by most mainstream scholars, is characterized by studying the Bible as a collection of ancient documents that are to be understood precisely as ancient documents, whose sense is determined by philological and historical questions about likely meaning in antiquity, irrespective of how the material came to be read subsequently by Jews and Christians. By contrast, a canonical approach is characterized by studying the Bible as the book of the church, where the historic and continuing context of reception and appropriation should properly make a difference to how the biblical documents are best interrogated, understood, and appropriated. Childs’s canonical approach in no way denies the value of historical-critical analysis of the biblical documents, but rather takes its methods and findings for granted, seeks to move beyond them, and recontextualizes the interpretive inquiry as a whole. Again, this approach envisages a mode of second naiveté for reading the biblical text.

⁹ See, for example, Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Stephen B. Chapman, *1 Samuel as Christian Scripture: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2016). Gary Anderson at Notre Dame is also a notable practitioner, as in his recent *Christian Doctrine and the Old Testament: Theology in the Service of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017).

¹⁰ Childs’s oeuvre is extensive. One of his most accessible works is his commentary, *Exodus* (London: SCM Press, 1974). The best overall account of Childs’s work is Daniel Driver, *Brevard Childs: Biblical Theologian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012).

Childs uses the terms *canon* and *canonical* as shorthand for a variety of concerns and processes involved in privileging the biblical documents and preserving them to be authoritative for future generations, who live beyond the context of the documents' origin. In the first instance this involved processes of editing and framing the material. The final/received form of the text is seen to be meaningful in its own right,¹¹ as in literary approaches. Moreover, a canonical collection creates its own literary context; the constituent documents are recontextualized, and can now be read in juxtaposition with documents that may have been unknown to the original authors but that may nonetheless be illuminating for understanding their subject matter. The continuing life of the Jewish and Christian communities, for whom these documents have always been authoritative, created modes of reading that often probed the subject matter of the text in profound, if sometimes surprising ways, and also offered wide-ranging synthetic understandings of how the material as a whole should best be understood and appropriated—understandings that still inform and underlie contemporary understandings and appropriations in both synagogue and church.

A fifth factor underlying theological interpretation is the growth of Jewish contributions to biblical scholarship. Historical-critical scholarship has often been as uninterested in, and dismissive of, Jewish interpretations as of Christian interpretations: rabbis and fathers alike were ingenious but operated with interpretive assumptions that could no longer be taken seriously. Consequently, some Jewish scholars have wanted to operate in straightforward historical-critical mode, where religious identity becomes irrelevant, and the interpretation of the biblical material in its ancient contexts of origin, prior to the advent of both Judaism and Christianity, becomes the scholarly concern. But some Jewish scholars have been seeking their own mode of a second naiveté, in which justice can be done to the biblical documents both in their contexts of origin and in their reception and appropriation by Judaism—neither confusing nor conflating these tasks, yet interested in the real continuities between them.

¹¹ This passes over legitimate questions of textual criticism, which relate to differing versions of the Old Testament in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Syriac, and so on. The point is to focus attention on the portrait that stands in the text rather than possible earlier versions (like J, E, D, P) that may or may not underlie it.

The most articulate voice here has been that of Jon Levenson at Harvard Divinity School.¹² In a series of brilliant essays on biblical hermeneutics Levenson both illuminated and reframed the overall interpretive task.¹³ One of the best known of these essays, “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” has sometimes been misread as a dismissal of biblical theology altogether, when in fact Levenson’s concern is to critique the tendency of Christians to covertly utilize Christian theological assumptions and yet present their work as though they were simply articulating the plain sense of the biblical text. Levenson seeks greater self-awareness and better hermeneutical understanding in the interpretive task. His own work offers fine examples of “biblical theology,” where Israel’s scriptures are seen to be illuminated by the specific readings of Jewish tradition alongside other readings.¹⁴

A sixth factor is the growth of ideological approaches to the Old Testament, of which feminism is the best known. Unlike conventional historical-critical approaches, which seek (in principle) to bracket out contemporary concerns, feminist approaches tend to prioritize readings of the text in relation to contemporary concerns for justice and gender equality. They can often function as a secular version of a “rule of faith,” the classic Christian sense that a reading of the biblical text should be informed by a wide-ranging sense of “how things go.” On any reckoning, all scholars, whether or not explicitly feminist, must take seriously the emancipation of women in Western culture in the modern period, which leads to women having roles that were simply

¹² There are also other weighty voices. See, for example, Moshe Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 2008); Benjamin D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015).

¹³ Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

¹⁴ Among Levenson’s works I would particularly draw attention to *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), where careful religio-historical work gives rise to a searching theological account of election, and his most recent book, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), whose Jewish content has many resonances for Christian readers.

not envisaged by the biblical writers in their assumptions and prescriptions about daily life.

There are also ideological approaches that question assumptions that biblical interpreters have characteristically made. For example, biblical scholars have generally treated the biblical deity as “God,” not just “a god.” While Zeus or Marduk may be written off as no more than constructs of the ancient imagination, the LORD is considered (with whatever qualifications) to be the one true God. But why should this assumption be made in a post-Christendom culture? Why should the LORD be regarded differently from Zeus or Marduk? When scholars like David Clines push such a question,¹⁵ it is salutary for those who are theologically concerned to have to articulate afresh the grounds for privileging the biblical portrayal of the God of Israel.

In each of these six factors, which I suggest set the context for contemporary theological interpretation, I have highlighted the notion of a second naiveté. This, in my judgment, is *the* key factor that enables a renewed Christian confidence in reading and appropriating Israel’s pre-Christian scriptures as Christian scripture, a fundamental resource for understanding God and the life of faith today. Where Wellhausen solely saw an insoluble conflict between “scientific work” and the “practical task of Christian service,” it is now possible to combine the two with not only intellectual but also moral and spiritual integrity.

Another way of putting the issue is that the historical awareness that Israel’s scriptures should be understood to be meaningful in their pre-Christian context is more hermeneutically interesting than sometimes realized. For it becomes clear that these documents of ancient Israel, precisely because they were privileged and preserved as authoritative for future generations, can be legitimately and responsibly read in more than one way. A classic Christian mode of reading, in which Israel’s scriptures are read in relation to Jesus Christ, may yet be meaningful, if one is open to imaginative, figurative, and poetic ways, as well as ancient-historical ways, of reading.¹⁶ The historical-critical concern to read these texts as expressive of the religious thought of

¹⁵ See for example “Metacommentating Amos” in David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 76–93, which I discuss more fully in my *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2018), 37–40.

¹⁶ This is memorably, and generally persuasively, argued by Richard Hays in his *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016).

ancient Israel and Judah—albeit the selected and privileged thought, which may not have been that which was to be found everywhere in Israel and Judah—has been greatly illuminating.¹⁷ The recognition that Israel's scriptures have a historic and continuing reception in Judaism means that there are conceptual and existential resources for reading that are not Christian but from which Christians can learn and be enriched.¹⁸

A key challenge for Christians today is to preserve that space and tension between the pre-Christian and Christian meaning of the material, neither sundering nor conflating these distinct frames of reference, for in that way it becomes possible also to make space for the Jewish frame of reference. It is not that “anything goes,” for in each frame of reference there are legitimate constraints that inform responsible understanding and use. Nonetheless, these ancient texts are meaningful in more than one context and more than one way.

Alternative Understandings of Theological Interpretation

What I have outlined above is *my* understanding of theological interpretation, as I have seen it developed in the work of leading scholars like Ricoeur and Childs and Levenson, and as I have sought to practice it in my own writing.¹⁹ I hope it would be acknowledged by at least some of my colleagues as a recognizable and helpful portrayal of significant contemporary movements. I need to acknowledge, however, that there are distinct alternative contemporary understandings of what theological interpretation is.

First, I recognize that thus far I have not mentioned arguably the most prolific and most widely read of contemporary theological interpreters of the Old Testament: Walter Brueggemann.²⁰ Brueggemann has probably done more than any other living Old Testament

¹⁷ The landmark mid-twentieth-century works of Eichrodt and von Rad retain real value.

¹⁸ Apart from the works mentioned above, a good example of a Jewish study of scripture and tradition from which Christians can profit is Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990 [1951]).

¹⁹ I offer detailed worked examples in my *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013).

²⁰ Good introductions to his approach are Walter Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church*, ed. and introduced by Carolyn Sharp (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2011), and Walter Brueggemann with Carolyn Sharp, *Living Countertestimony: Conversations with Walter Brueggemann* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

scholar to bring the Old Testament alive for people.²¹ He shares many of the concerns and understandings outlined above, not least the importance of a second naiveté, and offers memorable and engaging readings of the Old Testament in his many works. My reason for not mentioning him sooner is that he is somewhat *sui generis* in his approach, and resists easy categorization in terms of trends and movements. He has tended to maintain a rather distanced, and at times polemical, stance toward attempts to reengage classic theological categories and to rearticulate an explicitly ecclesial frame of reference for interpretation (as in the work of Childs and those influenced by him). He reckons such attempts are likely to domesticate the surprising and challenging voices of the Old Testament. He is also distinctive in his rhetorical readings and sociopolitical concerns. These have the advantage of pressing the question of what real difference the Bible might make to contemporary existence in the United States, not just in church or in a lecture room, but out on the street or in the hallways of power. The drawback is that he can pass over real differences between biblical and contemporary contexts too easily; and Brueggemann can read negatively things that the Old Testament presents positively if they do not fit his sociopolitical template. How helpful is it, for example, to view Solomon's reign in Jerusalem, including his building the temple, as no more than an entirely negative precedent for contemporary US militarism and economic aggression and its religious legitimations?²²

A second distinct understanding of theological interpretation, which is both more widespread and more difficult to characterize than the work of Brueggemann, can be illustrated from a recent book, *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*.²³ This is a collection of essays arising from the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar at SBL meetings in 2012–2014, which is itself an offshoot of the major Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar that, with the sponsorship of the

²¹ Another prolific theological interpreter of the Old Testament, to whom it is not possible to do justice here, is John Goldingay. Perhaps it may suffice to note that his series of popular Old Testament commentaries *For Everyone*, a counterpart to Tom Wright's similar New Testament commentaries *For Everyone*, will probably ensure him a wider and longer-lived readership than that of all other scholars mentioned here!

²² See "The Land Mourns," in Brueggemann, *Disruptive Grace*, 155–172, esp. 155–160.

²³ Craig Bartholomew and Heath Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2016).

Bible Society and some academic institutions, met from 1998 to 2007 and produced eight significant collections of essays in a Scripture & Hermeneutics Series. Central to the continuity of these seminars has been the role of Craig Bartholomew, who was entrusted with the leadership of the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar from its inception, and has been involved in the editing of all its publications, including the recent *Manifesto*. To be sure, the *Manifesto* is suitably restrained in its claims—"not . . . the only, first, or final word on theological interpretation,"²⁴ and its essays engage issues that feature in my own account, such as canon, ecclesial context, and the existential dimensions of good theology. Nonetheless, it represents an understanding that is distinct from what I have outlined above.

I initially hoped that the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar would be attempting a basic reconstrual of biblical interpretation as a whole, somewhat in the manner of the Yale scholars,²⁵ shifting the debates into fresh categories downwind from the typical liberal/conservative stand-offs about issues of history and historicity that have characterized modern biblical scholarship. But although each published volume from the Seminar contains interesting and diverse perspectives, the overall direction and stance of the project over time seemed to be less concerned to seek fresh categories and conceptualities for biblical interpretation than to reformulate familiar conservative categories and conceptualities for biblical interpretation in a fresh way. And this continues in the *Manifesto*. Thus, for example, philosophical considerations for not ruling out the reality of God and divine action are appealed to, the limits of typical biblical criticism and the often speculative nature of its conclusions are pointed out, the basic historicity of biblical portrayals of events is affirmed as necessary for biblical reliability for faith. These are time-honored arguments by thoughtful conservative Christians, arguments that can have real value, and that make sense to many people. But, for better or worse, they represent no real reenvisioning of biblical interpretation in the light of new hermeneutical resources. It is an unsurprising corollary that the *Manifesto* shows no concern with a second naiveté, or with the real challenges of ideological critiques, or with the importance of

²⁴ The wording is from the editorial preface, Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, x.

²⁵ The first volume, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller, had the promising title, *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000). Both Childs and Brueggemann contributed to the volume.

making conceptual space for, and learning from, Jewish theological approaches to the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁶

Craig Bartholomew's essay that concludes the *Manifesto* illustrates this lack of reenvisioning.²⁷ Bartholomew wants to give "covenant" a central role in understanding the biblical portrayal of creation and redemption. However, he notes that "for most historical critics, covenant is late and therefore excluded from being as central to the infrastructure of the Old Testament as we have suggested." He recognizes that "there are historical issues in biblical interpretation that are complex and best held open in the face of no solution at hand," but emphatically states that "covenant is not one of them." Rather, "the validity of the Old Testament's witness depends on covenant as an early institution in Israel; for that and other reasons, we position ourselves on the side that affirms covenant as emerging early in the life of Israel." And he implies in passing that Childs might be sympathetic to this position, on the grounds that Childs "pushed in the direction of seeing [covenant in the Pentateuch] as not anachronistic."²⁸ Unfortunately, this misrepresents Childs's approach: for example, Childs, in the course of discussing "the canonical shape of the Sinai witness," says this about the pentateuchal material in which covenant is most prominent:

In spite of much evidence that these chapters have indeed undergone a complex history of development, in my opinion it is methodologically a mistake to make the writing of an Old Testament theology directly dependent on its historical reconstruction. Rather, the approach being proposed is to describe the theology of the Old Testament according to the intertextuality of its canonical shaping and to seek to understand how this corpus of material was ordered and rendered within the context of scripture.²⁹

²⁶ An exception is the fine opening essay by Angus Paddison, "The History and Reemergence of Theological Interpretation" in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 27–47.

²⁷ Craig Bartholomew and Matthew Emerson, "Theological Interpretation for All of Life," in Bartholomew and Thomas, *Manifesto*, 257–273.

²⁸ Bartholomew and Emerson, "All of Life," 263.

²⁹ *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 53.

Bartholomew also seems unaware that issues of interpretation and biblical validity might be cast differently, and clearly illustrates why scholars have often been nervous about allowing theological concerns to be brought into discussions of historical issues.

How might the issue of covenant be handled in the mode of theological interpretation that I am proposing? Initially one should make a clear distinction between (a) “the world within the text,” what the Old Testament actually says in its received/final form, which is what readers encounter, and which has been in some way authoritative for its (would-be) believing readers through the ages; and (b) “the world behind the text,” all the questions about the composition and date of the text, and the origins of its content, that are central to discussions of the history of Israel and of the development of its religious thought and practices. The question of the origins and date of the covenant in Israel is a “world behind the text” question, and needs to be addressed with the methods of historiography. One can always argue the question on its own merits, if one is unpersuaded by common arguments. But whether covenant is “early” or “late” (whatever exactly those loose formulations envisage), what is really at stake in determining the “validity of the Old Testament’s witness” about covenant?

The answer to this surely lies in an evaluation of the subject matter of covenant as an articulation of some of the central dynamics of the relationship between the LORD and Israel, and an evaluation of the fact that those voices that now constitute Israel’s scriptures (when-ever the voices arose) have been *received as authoritative* for future generations of Israel whose rationale and identity is depicted in these particular writings. The form in which Israel’s faith has been preserved—the accounts in its writings that were privileged and became the form in which the material was to be influential for future generations—clearly and unambiguously gives covenant a central role. Covenant is central to major parts of the Old Testament, whether or not it was central in the history of Israelite religion; and covenant has been an important category in Jewish and Christian appropriation of Scripture down the ages. A second naiveté approach will resist allowing the “validity” of the biblical portrayal to be resolved in terms of a limited range of options for understanding the human processes that (putatively) gave rise to it. A theological understanding of this validity should surely be a matter of determining whether the dynamics of covenant are a meaningful account of the relationship between

God and his creation; and judgements here are ultimately inseparable from judgments about the wider canonical portrayal within the Bible as a whole, and the trust to be placed in its theological witness as a guide to life with God.

More could be said. My proposed recasting of the issues is not the only or necessarily the best way of tackling them. But it does offer a paradigm shift for considering issues of validity and authority in the Old Testament, a shift away from prioritizing particular historical arguments, whether of a conservative or liberal nature, toward prioritizing different concerns: to appraising the specific religious subject matter of the text when its portrayal is read with full imaginative seriousness as part of a literary witness received as authoritative by Jews and Christians since antiquity. I hope that my outline gives some idea of how a second naiveté can differ from a more conventional conservative stance within biblical criticism, such as characterizes Bartholomew and some of the other contributors to the *Manifesto*.

Theological Interpretation of the Story of Cain and Abel

It may be helpful to conclude with a fuller example of how readers today can rediscover the Old Testament through theological interpretation in second naiveté mode: the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1–16.³⁰

In historical-critical terms, it is a rich and challenging text. The story shows clear signs of an internal tradition history: although the narrative is set at the very beginnings of life on earth with only a handful of people alive, the story's own logic presupposes the regular conditions of a populated earth, that is, the world of ancient Israel. There is the differentiation of labor with Abel as a shepherd and Cain as a farmer (4:2); sacrifice as a practice is taken for granted (4:3–4); and Cain's anxiety that as a restless wanderer he may be murderously picked off (4:14) envisages the role of the nomad/vagrant on the fringes of settled communities. Presumably the story has been adapted to its present location because it illustrates something fundamental about life on earth.

³⁰ I offer a fuller reading in my *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88–101.

The story of rivalry between two brothers who are probably twins (in 4:1–2 Eve bears twice but only conceives once), a rivalry that leads to fratricide, resonates with the story of Romulus and Remus, a paradigmatic narrative for ancient Rome, and poses the issue of the deep divisions that can come between those who may in family terms be closest to each other.

But how should the story best be read? Although modern scholars have often wanted to see the story as a window onto ancient sociological tensions between farmers and shepherds, or between the inhabitants of arable land (say, the central hill country of Canaan) and inhabitants of the desert (say, the Negev), or between Israelites and Kenites, such issues at best lie in the background. The story itself poses a clear issue that challenges all readers: How should one understand the LORD's differential response to the sacrifices of Abel and Cain, which is unexplained by the narrator, and which sets in motion Cain's murder of Abel and his subsequent interaction with the LORD? One's decision here is likely to shape the reading of all that follows.

Despite the silence of the narrator, the working assumption of most readers from antiquity until now is that there must be a good reason for the LORD's rejection of Cain's sacrifice, and that this reason must be somewhere in the text. Although many possible reasons have been proposed, probably the most common option is to see Cain's offering as inferior to Abel's. In other words, Cain offered second best to God, and part of the moral of the story is that this will not do. This construal is finely expressed by Nahum Sarna:

The reason for God's different reactions may be inferred from the descriptions of the offerings: Abel's is characterized as being "the choicest of the firstlings of his flock"; Cain's is simply termed as coming "from the fruit of the soil," without further detail. Abel appears to have demonstrated a quality of heart and mind that Cain did not possess. . . . Thus the narrative conveys the fundamental principle of Judaism that the act of worship must be informed by genuine devotion of the heart.³¹

³¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 32.

One can see essentially the same interpretive move in the New Testament, where we read that “by faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain’s” (Heb. 11:4; that is, Abel in his offering displayed that prime quality of responsiveness to God that Christians call “faith”), and that “Cain . . . was from the evil one and murdered his brother . . . because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12; that is, Cain’s disposition and actions, presumably the sacrifice as well as the murder, were wrong, while Abel’s were right). Such a construal makes excellent moral and theological sense. It encapsulates an important truth of both Jewish and Christian faiths, and makes the story readily accessible. This is a meaningful theological interpretation, and an imaginative preacher should have no difficulty in relating it to life today.

Nonetheless, the fact that this reading is attested in the New Testament and regularly in Christian tradition and so has a certain obvious authority for Christian faith does not make it the only significant theological reading. An alternative approach is to return to the initial crux and to resist rationalizing the LORD’s preferential decision, instead seeing its inexplicable nature as integral to the point of the story. Such an interpretive move is rooted in the desire to hear the text’s own voice, even when it is surprising. Two considerations support this move. One is the narrative analogy with other twins in Genesis, Esau and Jacob, where a preferential decision—“the elder shall serve the younger”—is made while they are still in Rebekah’s womb (Gen. 25:23), and so neither Jacob nor Esau can have done anything to “deserve” being differently favored. The other factor is the extent in life generally to which people are differently favored for no reason of what they have done. Two things that matter greatly, intelligence and beauty, are differentially given from one’s mother’s womb. Likewise, people can encounter injustice, poverty, ill health, failure, or premature death for no reason related to anything they have done to deserve such things. For many people, especially those in “unfavored” situations, the challenge to handle such situations well, without being scarred or destroyed by them, can be a prime issue of life. A rationalizing question—“What have I/you/they done to deserve this?”—leads nowhere. Rather, the fruitful question is to look forward and to ask, “Given this situation, what might be made of it?” Jesus’s words about the man born blind illustrate this stance perfectly (John 9:1–3).

This is the nature of the LORD's words to Cain (4:7). Their interpretation is not easy, but the basic point appears to be that Cain, angry at being unfavored in relation to Abel, is going to be confronted by sinful bitter resentment, which will be like a wild animal wanting to destroy him—"but you must master it." Cain retains a choice. In the event, Cain ignores these words, and allows his resentment to have its way when he kills Abel. Later in Genesis, Esau also, like Cain, is unfavored. He is the elder who will have to serve the younger. He is also cheated out of his birthright by Jacob's brazen deception of the dying Isaac. Initially Esau simply wants to kill Jacob as soon as Isaac is dead (27:41). So Jacob leaves home. When, after many years, he returns he becomes increasingly apprehensive about what Esau will do: will he still be murderously resentful? Yet when the brothers meet, Esau welcomes Jacob graciously and tearfully. Esau, unlike Cain, has mastered the wild beast of resentment, and shown how deep disappointment can be well handled. It is a pity that in the history of Jewish and Christian interpretation Esau has regularly been given a bad press (as, for example, typifying Rome as an oppressor of Jews) rather than being recognized as a memorable exemplar.

This second naïveté reading of Cain and Abel respects and values the New Testament's reading of the story, and yet prefers a different reading that more likely captures the intrinsic concern of the ancient Hebrew narrative. By probing the issue of how to handle being unfavored in God's world, and by underlining that to choose how to respond is an intrinsic part of being human, it addresses a theological and existential issue of perennial significance. Insofar as Christians neglect the Old Testament, they do so to their own imaginative and moral and spiritual impoverishment.